

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2026 – St Lazarus Vigil – Ephesians 4.4

Sisters and brothers: We know and we affirm that unity is not optional for Christian believers. St Paul reminds us of this today in the reading from Ephesians, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling.” Each of us has been given grace and gifts to contribute to this Body we call the Church and to *strengthen* its unity.

This year we are grateful for the gifts of our sisters and brothers of the Armenian Church who have shared with us from their own tradition and given leadership to the whole Church as we reflect in this Week of Prayer for Unity. We give thanks to God for the witness of the Armenian Church which extends over many centuries: The Armenian nation was the first to embrace Christianity in the year 301, before Emperor Constantine made our religion official by the Edict of Milan in 313.

This remarkable heritage of the Armenian people continues today. The Armenian Church has witnessed to Christian truth, through her great theologians, such as St Gregory the Illuminator. (I am pleased that some Anglican Provinces such as the Anglican Church of Canada celebrate St Gregory the Illuminator among the *sanctorale* or calendar of saints). But even beyond her theological and spiritual teachings, the Armenian Church and her people have borne witness to the Christian Gospel through *suffering*, through genocide, displacement, persecution and even in recent wars with neighbouring Azerbaijan.

Even if we are not Armenian, as Christians we share in the suffering of the Armenian people, for we are all united through the one Spirit. Remember that St Paul in Ephesians emphasises that all Christians belong to one Body. There are no barriers of geography, nationality, ethnicity and tradition. Even though the Church is truly diverse, and we have different histories, languages, cultures and traditions, the Apostle teaches us that, *nevertheless we are one, because unity has been given to us as a gift from God*. This gift of unity is rooted in our baptism. It is a gift that is sustained by the Holy Spirit. Friends, our unity is not something that we create – it is something that God has given us, and it is our duty to recognise that unity and live in our daily lives.

I have had the privilege of being present at the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church in many places, London, Beirut, Cairo, Jerusalem, and in Holy Etchmiadzin. I was moved by the moment in the liturgy, when the peace is passed from the altar to the people, that the choir sings a beautiful hymn “the Church has become one”. It is a living testimony to our common faith that the Spirit of God comes and spreads among the faithful people, making them truly one Body.

All Christians must cherish this unity, celebrate it, extend it, and proclaim it. Last year, Christians of all traditions joined to celebrate the 1700 anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and we had many times to be able to confess together the Creed which that Council first drafted. We must strive to ensure that the experience of unity in the Nicene faith extends beyond the anniversary year, so that we can continue to witness to the power of the Spirit which makes the Church one.

A great theologian of Vatican II, the Dominican Yves Congar, said that “we pass through the door of ecumenism on our knees”. What he says is true, because it does take some effort and sacrifice to move out of our own comfortable traditions and familiar communities, to embrace, as beloved equals, our sisters and brothers of other traditions. We can only do this with prayerful humility, on our knees. The world is a very tense place right now, and there are forces that wish to divide the human family, there are powers that seek to dominate others, and even see whole populations as commodities to be bought and sold. So we can learn from a prayer attributed to St Gregory the Illuminator, and on our knees we can say, “*Gather again what has*

been scattered, raise up what has fallen, bind together what has been torn apart, and lead us back into the way of life.”

When St Paul says that we belong to one Body through the power of the one Spirit, he reminds us that our fundamental and overriding identity is that we are all children of God, we are brothers and sisters, belonging to Christ as one. The Church is called to be the first sign of the kingdom of justice, love, peace and unity that is God’s will for all his beloved human family.

This week, we reaffirm our commitment to overcome divisions and be reconciled to each other. Our unity is God’s will. Let us continue to work and pray for the time when, like 1700 years ago, we all receive the same Eucharistic Bread, confess the same faith, and recognise Christ in each other. This is not an option:

There is one body and one Spirit. There is one hope to which we are called.